DEPARTMENT OF STATE A/CDC/MR
REVIEWED BY P. Schmelz DATE 7/2/85
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99

Dear Mr. Lent:

During Secretary Vance's May 2 meeting with you, and several of your colleagues in the Congress, you asked about the nature of the United States Government's commitment to Saudi Arabia to provide the F-15 aircraft.

In mid-1974, a Department of Defense study of Saudi defense needs recommended that the Saudis acquire a modern follow-on interceptor capability in the 1980s. In November 1974, Assistant Secretary of Defense Ellsworth conveyed the United States Government's agreement in principle to be responsive to a Saudi request to purchase an advanced fighter. This was reaffirmed by senior U.S. officials in April and September 1975. The Saudis expressed interest in sixty aircraft. In March-April 1976 a Saudi team, including Lightning pilots, visited the United States for a "hands on" inspection of the aircraft, including orientation flights in the F-14 and F-15 (no twin-seat F-16 was then available). Deputy Secretary of Defense Clements, in October 1976, confirmed that the United States was willing to be responsive to a Saudi request for a follow-on fighter aircraft. He was told that since the Ministry of Defense and Aviation and Royal Saudi Air Force study of the various aircraft available had not yet been completed, no decision had been reached on which aircraft they would request.

The Honorable
Norman F. Lent,
House of Representatives.

In February 1977, the Saudis formally requested the F-15. The request for an advanced fighter was reviewed by this Administration under the guidelines of the President's arms transfer policy. Sale of an advanced aircraft to Saudi Arabia was determined to meet a legitimate defense need and to serve U.S. national security interests.

During a visit by Crown Prince Fahd in May 1977 this Administration affirmed its willingness, subject to Congressional consultations, to provide Saudi Arabia the advanced aircraft of its choice. During President Carter's visit to Riyadh in January 1978, Saudi officials stressed the need for prompt action on the F-15.

As you know in February 1978 the Secretary announced the President's decision to put before the Congress for review the proposal to sell sixty F-15 aircraft to Saudi Arabia.

Sincerely,

Warren Christopher
Acting Secretary

Drafted: NEA/ARP:JWTwinam
5/4/78:x20503

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